

The Upside-Right. by Genevie

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Summary:

The next time the upside-down rises, he doesn't even realise it until he feels someone wrap around him, pulling him close.

The Upside-Right.

Will doesn't cough up his first slug on Christmas eve; he doesn't cough his last one up then, either.

He learns to hold his bladder until he can't any longer so that his rushes to the bathroom never seem weird for being frequent. He puts off washing his hands, brushing his teeth, taking a shower, because these things are also good excuses. He figures out how to gag without making a sound louder than the rush of a faucet or the flush of a toilet, starts pinching himself to bring back some of the colour to his face.

It scares him more to think about how many slugs he's loosed onto Hawkins than to consider how many exist, still, in his stomach. Once, he tries to catch one in his cupped hands. What he'll do with it, he doesn't know, but he figures that anything is better than letting it go free. It slips away from him like water and when the school bathroom shifts to the upside-down, everything is sticky with mucus. For five minutes he searches through both upside-down and upside-right but the slug is gone.

After class, Mr. Clarke takes him aside and asks if everything is all right. Will tells him what he tells everyone else: that he is fine. And nothing more is made of how much time he'd spent in the bathroom. Of course it hurts him to lie. Of course he wishes he can talk to someone. It's just that everyone seems so happy now, so relieved that he's alive and well, and all he can think is that he's put them through enough already.

Besides, maybe it's all in his head.



There are things that his friends don't know about the upside-down. Nobody tells them about the parasite that had been buried belly-deep inside of Will, or mentions that he'd been so close to dying that Hopper had to keep pounding his chest even after his ribs cracked. As far as they know, this chapter of his story ends where Eleven found him, curled up in Castle Byers, poisoned and hurt, yes, but dead?

Absolutely not.

After the demogorgon and the thessalhydra, Mike builds a campaign around exploring a swampy wasteland that's home to a demon resurrected once every thousand years. Everything about the swamp is hostile. Its waters try to suck them down one moment, and rise beneath them like a geyser the next. There's a dizzying quality to the air and the boys are constantly rolling to prevent confusion effects. Small birds perch on their brows to peck at their eyes; large ones clasp their poison talons onto their shoulders and try to carry them into the caustic sky. There are dragons that breathe acid, crocodiles with teeth so sharp they can penetrate steel. Hags and goblins and bullywugs keep small communities along the way; the demon's gatekeepers. Will-o-the-Wisps light up divergent paths like lanterns, and the boys spend two hours trying to re-establish their route after Dustin fails an intelligence check against one and Lucas and Will follow him into the trap.

At the climax, the ground begins to writhe beneath their characters' feet. It feels more solid than the sopping wet mud and there's a slippery quality to it that has to be rolled against once every third turn. Dustin and Lucas are on the edges of their seats, practically pleading with Mike to tell the story faster, but Will knows what's coming, has picked up on the clues laid out throughout the story.

Slugs. An entire swamp of slugs.

It's his turn. As Will the Wise, he has a duty to uncover the truth; as Will Byers, he has duty, he thinks, to present himself as someone whole and reasonably undamaged, and he can tell from the sideways glances he's received that his friends already think he's acting kind of strange. Both Wills battle in his mind, their presence heavy as a headache. He pretends to be thinking about his next move and when the others become impatient, he pretends to be teasing them.

He is never more relieved to hear Jonathan's footsteps on the stairs. The boys groan and he groans with them, another imitation of normalcy. "I'm going to spend the whole week thinking about my next move," he says, already halfway up the stairs. "Trust me, it's going to be so cool."

But there is no next move. Will spends the next Sunday faking a stomach bug and the boys finish the campaign with Nancy as the wizard.



Will quickly learns that loneliness is not just about physical isolation; that even when he's surrounded by people, its ache can grow in his chest like a balloon filled with hot helium.

The tenth slug gets coughed up in the forest. Mike and Lucas and Dustin are all with him, their conversation about the D&D expansion Lucas got for his birthday quieted by the intensity of Will's fit. They circle him, concerned, but he pulls away and leans a hand against a nearby tree, his back to them all.

Just as the ninth slug was bigger than the eighth, the tenth is larger than the ninth, less long but with significantly more girth. It drops to the ground, slithering beneath a pile of dead leaves.

"You all right, man?"

"You didn't hurl, did you?"

"Gross, Dustin."

"Does it look like he hurled?"

"Why the shit would I look?"

"Because it's just puke! What are you, afraid of it?"

"Shut up, Lucas, of course I'm not afraid of puke."

"Acowardsayswhat."

"What?"

"Gotcha! You are. You totally are. Dustin's afraid of puke, Dustin's afraid of puke!"

"Both of you shut up. Will. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he says, wiping his mouth on the back of his sleeve. The upside-down has asserted itself all across the forest except for where his friends stand. It makes them look like angels, otherworldly and pure. Not like him. "Still sick, I guess. You know, from Sunday?"

They know. They understand. They do not register the lie and that just makes Will feel worse. These are his friends. His best friends. The very same friends who risked their lives—actually, seriously, risked their lives—for him.

And he's standing right there, meeting their eyes, lying to them about something that affects them all.

This is the second kind of loneliness. The worst kind of loneliness. Dustin pats him on the back and they continue on as if nothing happened.



He vomits the eleventh slug in his bed. It slithers up his esophagus while he sleeps and is already at the base of his throat when he wakes up, gagging. His whole body freezes and he worries that his mom might hear him, but nobody knocks on his door; nobody barges through it, concerned.

The slug falls into his lap and flops in place, leaving its mucous on his sheets. He reaches out to touch it but it moves away, just beyond his fingertips. Behind it, the upside-down begins to flicker into existence, slow like a dying light bulb, and he closes his eyes, bracing himself against its darkness.

A voice sounds from somewhere nearby, calling his name. The sound of it perches on the tip of familiarity, but he can't figure out why. *It's just a trick*, he thinks. Just the upside-down trying to work its way even deeper inside of him, and he isn't going to let that happen. He inches backwards on his bed until the headboard presses hard against his back, and he keeps his eyes shut tight.

"Will."

Now there's a hand on his knee, human and warm; friendly. Nothing

ever touched him the first time when he was in the upside-down, not before the demogorgon found him. Even in his most desperate imagination he couldn't feel his mother's arms around him, his brother's hand on his shoulders, his friends messing with his hair, slamming their bodies into his, playfully, as they walked.

Beneath him, his bed is solid and warm. When he rubs a hand against the sheets, they feel clean and soft and exactly like polyester should feel. The mattress creaks when he shifts his weight onto its weak spot. He is still home, and because home is a safe place he chances opening his eyes.

Everything is dark and dingy, various shades of grey. Even the girl who sits on foot of his bed where the slug had been, curled up with her knees to her chin. What he can see of her clothing is so dirty that he can't tell what colour it once was, and it's hard for him to discern where her shaved hair ends and the filth caking her skin begins. There's a wildness in her eyes. It's filled with both relief and a deep-seated fear that he can feel coursing through his own nerves. He's seen her before, once, from the small slit he'd managed to make of his eyes. He was so tired then, so weak that she barely registered to him.

“Are you...?”

Still curled up, she taps her knee with her first two fingers and says, “Eleven.”

“My friends told me about you. You flipped a car, right over their heads. You made Troy pee his pants. You saved them, lots of times. And then you were gone.”

She nods.

“With the demogorgon.”

She nods again.

“Are you okay?”

A shake, no, slower than the others, as if she had to think about it first.

“Why not? What's wrong?”

She says nothing, just smiles, sad and trembling, tears like glass form in the corners of her eyes, hard, not yet falling.

“I'm not Mike, or Dustin, or Lucas, but I can help.”

“Yes.”

He's so used to being treated like his skin is made of gossamer, like he's the prince in the castle held by a dragon, that it surprises him how quickly she agrees. “Oh. Okay. Yeah, I'll help. What do you need me to do?”

“The gate,” she says. “Close it.”

“Where is it?”

Reaching forward, Eleven taps her fingers against Will's chest and he hopes that she can't feel how hard his heart is beating. “You,” she says. “The gate.”

You. The gate. Those three little words are colder than the upside-down. They worm into him, curling his fingers into fists until his whole body trembles from the strain. If he is the gate what does that mean for his friends, his family, the people of Hawkins as a whole? Is he dangerous? Could a monster every bit as bad as the demogorgon slip next from his throat and make its nest in the upside-right?

“Me?”

“Will. Don't be afraid.”

It doesn't work. He's terrified. “What about you? How do I get you through the gate?”

“Can't. Trapped.”

“I can still help you. Before I close it.”

“No.”

“Why not.”

“In-between.”

“You mean, you're somewhere else?”

“Yes.”

“Is it somewhere you can leave?”

She's shaking her head, shoulders raised. Her hands are above her knees, palms-up. A look of confusion is etched into her face.

“You don't know,” he says. “Well, we'll figure it out. Okay?”

“No Mike.”

“You don't want me to tell the others?” A nod. “Why not?”

“Secret.”

“You can't tell me?”

“No. Friends keep secrets.”

“Oh, okay. You want this to be our secret?”

“Yes,” she says, then she spits in the palm of her hand and extends it to Will. “Swear.”

What can he do? He spits, he takes her hand. They shake. They have a swear, unbreakable. “Swear,” he says.

“Not safe,” she says, still gripping his hand. Friends help each other out.”

“And you don't want to put Mike in danger. Does that mean... is the in-between dangerous too?”

“Bad place.”

“Worse than the upside-down?”

"Different." The glassy tears shatter and fall, leaving trails in the dirt on her face.

"Eleven?"

"It's time."

"Time for what?"

"To say goodbye," she says, and his bedroom begins to flicker back through the darkness, back into the upside-right. His hold on her hand tightens, as if he can keep her here with him, but all too soon his hand is grasping onto the air and she is gone.

He looks for the slug but it's nowhere to be found.



There is no twelfth slug.

Now, the upside-down sneaks up on Will with predatory suddenness. Each time, his heart leaps; each leap lifts him further towards that fine edge between madness and sanity. Without the slugs to alert him to the next spell, everything makes him anxious—the flickering of electricity during a thunderstorm, dust motes caught in beams of light, the white noise of a dead television channel, the smell of the forest after a heavy rain.

He cries more when he's alone. Quiet, whole-body sobs which reignite the pain in his ribs, which black him out from the rest of the upside-right. He feels like he's slipping into a constant downwards spiral, its whirling tempests thick with the worry that he's letting Eleven down, that he's opening the gate rather than closing it.

She is there every time the world shifts but she doesn't say anything about his successes or about his failures. She just sits with him, quiet and solid and warm as a rock in the sun. This is how he learns that he doesn't need to put everything to words, that sometimes it's okay to just sit in silence with someone who knows you are hurting, who just wants you to be well.

It doesn't stop him from crying alone. Eleven doesn't exist in the

upside-right, and neither does anyone who thinks he's feeling anything worse than shaken up. Bridging the gap between that perceived state and the one he's truly in remains a daunting prospect. He puts it off. He tells himself that's what's best. The next time the upside-down rises, he doesn't even realise it until he feels Eleven's arms wrap around him, pulling him close, holding him tight.

"Sad?" Eleven asks when he extracts himself from her hug.

"Yes."

"Alone."

"Yes." His voice shakes, stretching the word longer than its single syllable.

"No. Not alone."

"Because you're here?"

"Not alone either." She places a hand on his shoulder and he knows what she means.

"But you're still trapped, and I can't figure out how to close the gate. Some helper I am..."

"Will. You don't know? The gate is closing."

"It is?"

"Come."

Taking his hand, she leads him off his bed and out of his room, down the hallway, into the kitchen where Joyce is doing the dishes, surrounded by a halo of upside-right. "Safe," Eleven says. She guides him to the front window. There is a point in the distance where the corruption ceases to exist, a frayed-fabric line, like the two dimensions are being separated at the seams. "Safe," she says again.

"The upside-down... it's losing its power."

"Yes."

“How?”

“You.”

“But I'm not doing anything.”

“Enduring,” she says. “Staying good.”

She guides him back into the kitchen, where Joyce is turning off the faucet, done with the dishes. Will doesn't understand why Eleven brought him here until the upside-down flickers away, and Eleven is gone, and Joyce is facing him, taking in his tear-blotched face, his wet eyes, his lips pursed against a tremble.

She pulls him into her arms.

Not alone.

He tries to hold himself together but his mother's hug presses down hard on his chest, squeezing out the pain he's been keeping inside of himself. *Not alone*, he thinks, again, when he gets the urge to pull away, to retreat to his room. *Not alone*. She holds him until he stops crying, and then for a little longer after that.

He doesn't feel worse for letting her know, through his tears, that he is not as well as he seems, and that makes him feel a little bit better.



Eleven never becomes much of a talker but she listens to Will with patience and interest and a level of empathy that he couldn't see even in his mother's eyes as she sat beside him in the hospital, her face divided by joy and by tears, the smell of the upside-down still on her fingers as she brushed his hair away from his face.

With each shift from down to right, Eleven stays a little bit longer. It's like she's reminding her body of its place in the real world, bit by bit, and it's gradually shifting its position. Will says as much to her and she smiles, nodding. Then, she stands up and makes her way to Will's window, opening it enough so that she can climb outside.

“Look,” she says.

“What are you doing?”

“Outside.”

She's standing on green grass with the blue sky above her, creating her own halo of rightness within the upside-down.

“That's amazing! You're free?”

“No.”

“But...”

“Soon,” she says. Then, smiling, she adds, “Mike.”

“He's going to be thrilled. No, better than thrilled. He's going to be *ecstatic*.”

“He'll. Blow his mind?”

“Yeah, yeah, he'll totally blow it. Like, boom.” He waves his hand around his head like a mushroom cloud and she laughs; a small, insecure sound like a baby bird still learning its song.

Eleven spends the rest of her time right there on the Byers' lawn, taking in the heat of the sun and the chill of the dew-damp grass beneath her feet, and Will watches her until she's gone.

It isn't until he's looking back inside his room that he realises he didn't notice everything becoming upside-right again.